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SUBJECT: ANGOLA REPORTS PROGRESS TOWARDS ELECTIONS IN 2008

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a briefing for the Diplomatic Corps, Virgilio Fontes Pereira, the Minister of Territorial Administration and head of the Interdepartmental Committee on the Electoral Process (CIPE) suggested President Dos Santos would announce the date for parliamentary elections by early ¶2008. Fontes Pereira added the long delayed pre-electoral period allowed the GRA time to build confidence in Angola's electoral process by ensuring the participation of opposition parties early on and expanding lines of communication to the country's rural areas, but acknowledged many Angolans (especially the rural poor and uneducated) fear elections will bring a return to civil war. A robust voter education program, including the participation of local civil society, could help counter these concerns. It will be difficult to depoliticize voter education, however, given the MPLA's strong grip on government institutions. End Summary.

Elections in 2008 - No, Really, This Time We Mean It

¶2. (U) On October 11, the GRA briefed the diplomatic corps on the recently completed registration process and next steps in the run-up to parliamentary elections expected in 2008. According to Fontes Pereira, the registration of 8.039 million voters over the ten-month registration period was "credible, universal, and transparent." Fontes Pereira added that the successful registration process had created conditions which would allow the President to call for parliamentary elections in 2008, most likely in September-October. The Minister suggested President Dos Santos would announce the date for parliamentary elections during the first quarter of 2008 to allow the CIPE to conduct a one-month supplemental registration period to register voters who will turn 18 by election day.

It Was Worth the Wait

¶3. (U) Fontes Pereira described for diplomats the conditions in Angola set against the GRA's 2004 decision to develop a comprehensive voter administration system to support parliamentary and presidential elections. He said post conflict Angola had just emerged from nearly 30 years of civil war. Roads were in poor condition, bridges had been destroyed, and mine fields severed lines of communication. The flow of refugees and the dislocation of community settlements made identification of citizens and population centers difficult. Many areas were inaccessible and political dialogue was non-existent. Between 60-70 percent of registered voters did not have an identification document. Fontes Pereira said, "The stigma of the failures of Angola's electoral system had to be overcome." In the minds of many, especially older rural Angolans, elections equaled civil war. He added that the GRA's registration brigades found pockets,

especially in rural areas, where residents did not know the civil war was over.

¶4. (U) Fontes Perreira then outlined how the GRA began its electoral process by demining lines of communication and improving roads. Refugees started to return and key bridges were replaced. The government began reaching out to citizens to build confidence in state institutions. The GRA fostered an inclusive dialogue with political parties to develop a new law for elections, ensuring political parties participated in every decision. When the parties asked for more time for consultations or registration, it was given. NGOs and civil society reviewed and monitored the GRA's progress. Efforts toward peace and democracy in Angola have failed, Fontes Pereira said, because UNITA leaders did not believe their rural supporters were properly included in the process. This time, he said, GRA registration brigades had access to all parts of the country and identified areas where low registration figures required increased attention. The quality of the work done over the past 3 years by the combined efforts of all stakeholders, concluded Fontes Pereira, is reflected in the successful registration of over 8 million Angolans.

Comment - Next Steps

¶5. (SBU) Angola's successful completion of voter registration is an important step forward in eventual elections. While many doubted 2008 elections a few months ago, it seems that the current conventional wisdom is that legislative elections will take place in 2008. There still is a long road ahead, however, especially in convincing many voters that an

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election will not mean another descent into civil war. Urban Angolans are calling for an election, but rural voters are still suspicious. It was the perceived disenfranchisement of rural voters that many credit as the root cause for the civil war starting up again after the last elections, and no one wants to repeat that. As a result, voter and civic education must be a high priority for the GRA, local civil society, and international partners. While they agree with the need for greater voter education, opposition groups worry that the MPLA, who has control of many of the institutions that would be involved in government civic education efforts, will use these activities to spread its political branding and message. We still have a long way to go towards elections, however, and continued and strengthened engagement both bilaterally and through regional and international groups is needed to help keep the process moving forward.
FERNANDEZ